Fifty Years Have Come and Gone

By JOHN TYREE FAIN

To commemorate the semicentennial of the beginning of the present book page, I have been asked to make a few comments on its history. Moreover, since I am unable to get up to Nashville to turn over old records, I shall have to confine myself to the first seven years of its publication and to rely chiefly on material that I published ten years ago on the writings of the late Donald Davidson, the first editor of the page. After Davidson's editorship ceased in 1930, the book page was reinstituted under the editorship of Ralph Morrissey. Then for some years it was conducted by Richmond Croom Beatty, and since his death it has been conducted by Mrs. Beatty. The details of this later history are unknown to me, and I hope somebody in Nashville can fill them in for me. I also wish that the first issue of the page, February 10,1924, could be reproduced for this commemorative occasion.

In a letter written from Oberlin, Ohio, Aug. 23, 1923, Davidson wrote to Allen Tate, who was a senior at Vanderbilt at the time: "I had planned this fall, if I had the time, to try to make arrangement with either the Tennessean or the Banner for a real honest to goodness literary column, such as they ought to have—or even a page . . . and if as seems probable, I have no time for it, the idea will be yours and I'll help see you through." Tate jumped at the idea. He was trying to make some money to supplement the fellowship he thought he was going to get to do graduate work for the school year of 1923-24. But he did not get the fellowship and thus was unable to stay in Nashville. So Davidson arranged to edit the page by himself.

IN JANUARY of 1924 he got together with John H. Nye, managing editor of The Tennessean. The pay was to be ten dollars a week, which was a much needed addition to Davidson's salary of $1800 dollars a year as instructor of English at Vanderbilt. "The Tennessean's Book Review and Literary Page" began the next month. To each Sunday edition of the paper Davidson contributed a column of book news and, during the first year, one or more book reviews of his own. But he gradually expanded his book news column and gave it a name, "The Spyglass," including in it book news, reviews, and comments on literary subjects in general. So he had to cut down on his extra reviews. Turning through the pages of the old file during the seven years of Davidson's editorship and realizing that Davidson was reading a half-dozen current books every week (to say nothing of writing about them), one is amazed that he had time to do it, brilliant though he was. For at the same time he was helping with the publication of the local poetry magazine The Fugitive until its demise in 1925, publishing two volumes of his own poetry, writing regularly for the periodical Creative Reading and occasionally for such magazines as Forum, Saturday Review of Literature, Sewanee Review and for several "little" magazines—besides teaching full time at Vanderbilt. And then there were odd jobs at the Tennessean that he simply could not resist, though he told himself only that he needed the money. For instance, he occasionally ghosted "I Reckon So," a syndicated column written by one of the Tennessean editors, T. H. Alexander, who would give him a couple of days' notice and suggest subject matter. Older readers of these notes will remember the column's flavor, some of which comes through in the following i926 letter to Davidson: "Under separate cover I am sending a bunch of letters—almost all inspired by the columns you wrote which is proof of reader interest. . . . Young feller me lad, I need aid, assistance and moral support pronto. Can you write me a column for Monday. . . . Note what the Montgomery man (see letters) says about the new (Andrew) Johnson biography. Might try that, just remembering that our Knoxville Journal readers think him the cow's tits. . . . Also I have a check for you. Don't you ever want money? Hells bells."

IN THE BEGINNING of the book page most of the reviewing was done by Davidson and his associates among the Fugitive poets. Of 176 reviews during the first seven months Davidson wrote 35, John Crowe Ransom 31, Allen Tate 24, Stanley Johnson 24, Jesse Wills 20. But by the fall of 1924 Tate was living in New York, and Johnson had gone to work for the Banner, so Davidson made some effort to enlarge his group of contributors. Local people other than the Fugitives—Vanderbilt faculty and students, members of the Tennessean staff, and townspeople—who became frequent contributors were Walter Clyde Curry, James I. Finney, Roy Garis, Albert Mason Harris, Robert S. Henry, William Kingsbury, Lyle Lanier, Andrew Lytle, Abbot Martin, George Mayfield, Edwin Mims, Marshall Morgan, Barr Moses, H. C. Nixon, Frank Owsley, Edd Winfield Parks, Anne Rankin, Linda Rhea, H. B. Schermerhorn, Theodora Scruggs, Kate Trimble Sharber, Alice Stockell, Warren Taylor, Frank Waldrop, Richard West, A. P. Whitaker, G. B. Winton and Richmond Beatty (then a VU graduate student). In the first years of the page few out-of-town contributors were encouraged.

BUT IN SPITE of the fact that the book page was maintained pretty much as a local enterprise, by the spring of 1928 it had become another fulltime job carried on in the editor's spare time, and Davidson decided to give it up. To put the matter thus, however, is to state it too simply. Actually he was thinking about leaving Nashville. Though Vanderbilt now seems to consider the Fugitive-Agrarian literary movement one of her chief claims to fame, this was not true in the twenties and thirties. When John Crowe Ransom left the English department, apparently nobody in authority really asked him to stay. When Lyle Lanier left the philosophy department, Chancellor Kirkland was said to have been glad of it. Frank Owsley was finally fed up and left the history department. It is a long and complex story and this is not the place to tell it. Anyhow how was Vanderbilt to know? Prophets are usually honored in their own country only after it is too late.

If Davidson felt this kind of disparagement, the reasons for it were not shared by his newspaper associates, as may be noted in this typical reaction of Jan. 1, 1928 from Alexander: "I hear vague mutterings that you may leave V.U., because of unsatisfactory salary, etc. It's none on my damned business, of course, but before you throw your brass hat away, if you are thinking of so doing, let me talk to you of a matter I have been discussing with J. Finney, the editor of the publick print. He and I think you would adorn the editorial page of the Tennessean each morning. Keep this under your hat, as an anchor to windward, but there may be gold in them thar mountings. In 20 years a bronze tablet will mark your rooms at Wesley Hall. Tourists will gape and spread halitosis fron the rubberneck wagons. Even Georgians will know who you are. As Tom Heflin chants: Hold the Line, the Americans are coming!"

BUT REGARDLESS of his thoughts about leaving Vanderbilt, even leaving the South, Davidson felt that Colonel Luke Lea should put the literary page on a respectable financial footing. As he explains to Tate in a letter of March 21, 1928: "Recently I quit the Tennessean, having suffered long enough under the indignity of a pitiful wage. They countered by putting me technically on leave of absence, while they stirred up Colonel Lea." Apparently Lea was considerably stirred up. He offered Davidson $200 a month and said he wanted to syndicate the book page to the two other papers owned by him, the Knoxville Journal and the Commercial Appeal. In accepting, Davidson said, "May I say that I interpret this offer . . . to mean that you have ambitious views as to the possibilities of the book page in relation to the cultural development of this section. . . . I take this offer as, in effect, a challenge and an inspiration."

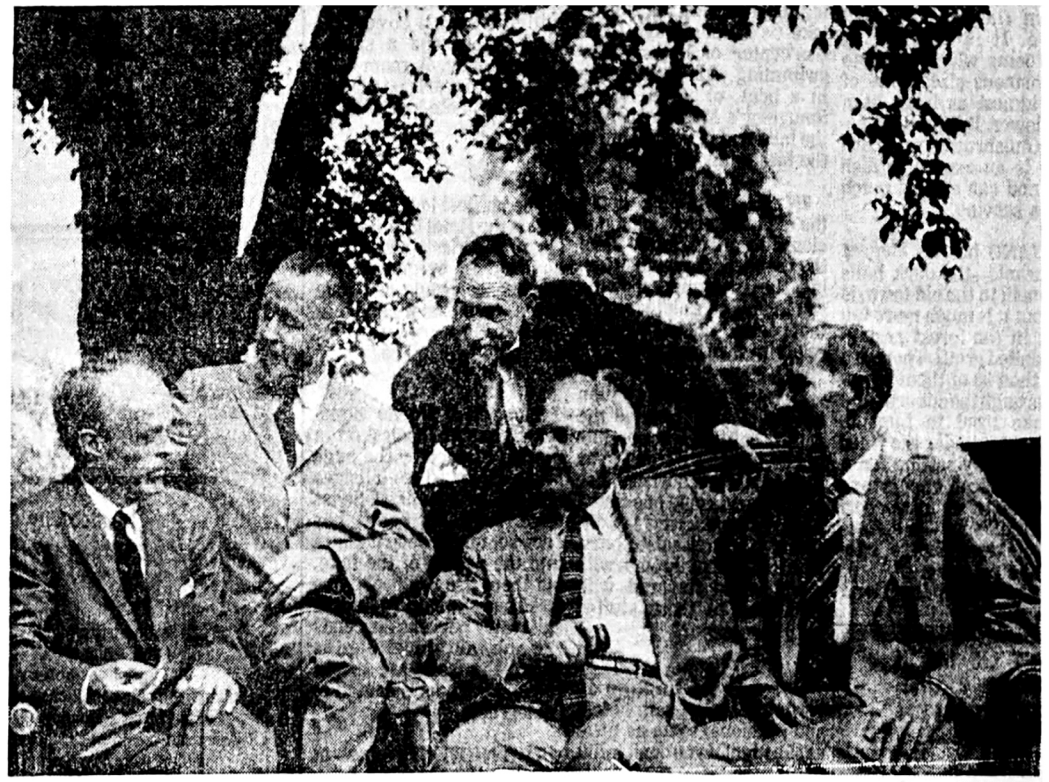
A sheet of suggestions to reviewers sent out at this time indicates Davidson's reaction to the new challenge. It was his hope, he said, "to publish an independent-minded book page of the utmost distinction possible," one that would maintain "a characteristic Southern point of view" so as to offset the "critical despotism" of New York. With syndication came many new readers and contributors from the areas covered by the other two papers—East and West Tennessee and parts of Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia, and Kentucky. Davidson's files contain many letters like this one fron William Alexander Percy in Greenville, Miss.: "I was delighted to see your name on The Literary Page of the Commercial Appeal. Judging from the result you have already accomplished, you are going to make this the outstanding page of literary criticism in Southern journalism."

WITH EXPANDED publication also came more correspondence, the mailing of books to out-of-town contributors, the preparation of mats to be sent to Memphis and Knoxville. So Davidson asked Edd Winfield Parks, who was then working on his doctor's degree at Vanderbilt, to do parttime work on the page. Something of the nature of Parks' indoctrination as well as something of the spirit that informed the page can be envisioned in a letter of the period in which an out-of-town contributor says, "I found the Mary Gladstone journal uncompromisingly dull—I'll review it if you wish, but Dutton won't like it!" At the top of the letter is a note to Parks, "Write him, we don't care what Dutton think. Want *his* opinion."

The independence expressed in this note had always characterized the page, but it was the lack of bias, the manifest justice, that attracted more and more readers. Even when authors knew that Davidson would not approve of their books, they still wanted his reactions. "I've been waiting for the blast on 'The Lyric South' from your book page," wrote Addison Hibbard in a letter of August 1928. "Most of the reviews have been idle chatter. . . I know you'll write what you think and I honestly want to profit by what you say." And the files of the book page years contain just as many letters like this one from Louis Bromfield: "This is just a line to thank you for the profound and intelligent article about 'Miss Annie Spragg.' As you may have guessed in the case of such a book — complicated as it is and with the idea behind it left for the reader to discover — the suffering from the hands of crude and hasty reviewers is intense and the blunders extremely annoying. Therefore I appreciate more than I can say the way you have treated 'Annie.'"

Davidson's editorship of the book page continued two years and seven months after syndication and then suddenly came to an end. The Great Depression had arrived — which seemed reason enough. In his circular letter of November 26, 1930, announcing the fact to publishers and reviewers, some of his deep feelings show through: "I regret to inform you that the book page which has been published under my editorship has been discontinued. What The Tennessean itself intends to do in the future I am unable to say. My own connection with The Tennessean ceases completely on November 30. Entirely aside from my personal part in the matter, I feel very sorrowful that the book page, as a medium of contact between the readers of this section and the world of current books, is apparently about to be entirely lost. To all, my best, my sincerest good wishes, with deepest regret that our acquaintance in the world of book reviewing — in some cases of several years standing — must thus be broken."

MANY REPLIES were written on the assumption that the book page would resume publication later with Davidson as its editor. Luke Lea Jr. seemed to encourage this assumption in answering protests. Others who received Davidson's letter assumed suppression and wrote deploring the fact. The Tennessean went into receivership some time later, and when it became solvent again, Davidson was not asked to resume the editorship. In his article published in the May 1931 Bookman telling the story of his experience as a "provincial book page editor" Davidson says: "During my seven years I recall only one instance in which a review was suppressed by the owner. That was a review of Stuart Chase's *Your Money's Worth*, which was cut out because it 'might offend the national advertisers.' I remember no instance in which I was scolded after the appearance of a review. But I published many a review that might have called for a scolding, if the owner had not been either too careless, or too indulgent, or too high-minded to notice — I do not know which!" Of course it is possible to read between the lines of this statement and come up with implications that Davidson may not have intended. But apparently the book page was not suppressed. It just came to an end, and at the very time when it was ready to exert the kind of influence of which its first editor had dreamed.



Fugitives Reunion, May 6, 1956: Tate, Moore, Warren, Ransom, Davidson

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